

LOVE IN THE TIME OF HEGEMONIC SUICIDE

It started with the willful destruction of USAID.

I start what is sure to be a kaleidoscopic (or some might call disorganized) reflection on the undercurrents of power as Trump attempts to build a new America based on illusion by reminding that the first assault was on USAID. USAID was targeted, among other reasons, because it supported the kind of pro-democracy NGOs that have haunted Viktor Orbán for years, and also because the realities of aid in the field look *funny* to those pickled in the provincialism of culture war.

But it's a useful reminder, because the destruction of USAID was both the first great strike against Congress' power of the purse (because Marco Rubio was refusing to spend on programs Congress had appropriated, including programs with bipartisan support, like PEPFAR), and also the consensual destruction of a great deal of soft power the United States built up going back to the Cold War. *Then*, during the Cold War, USAID was recognized as a low-cost way to contest another great power and, along the way, to do something good and maybe even create a few new reliable markets for farmers in the heartland. *Now*, it had become a symbol of a past hegemony that conspiracy theorists, starting with the richest man in the world, had made suspect.

This reflection will focus on how Stephen Miller's two-faced war on America's immigrant diversity and Latin America exists in tension with Trump's attempt to subjugate both the Democrats and China. I'm attempting to capture these intertwined threads to get to a point I've raised before. We know what the decline from democracy to authoritarianism looks like. Trump is overtly following Orbán's path to competitive authoritarianism. But far too few have

considered what it means that Trump is pursuing that model *while* committing hegemonic suicide.

The willful destruction of USAID laid an important foundation for two “negotiations” that are bedeviling Trump’s effort to consolidate power: the trade war Trump picked with China, and a funding fight with Democrats over whether Congress will be Congress anymore.

Art of the Deal guy is conducting a bunch of “negotiations” right now. Many of them involve levying threats, whether threatening to withdraw government funding, launching frivolous lawsuits, imposing draconian tariffs, or even charging people with fabricated crimes, and in response, extorting bribes, like the free work some white shoe law firms decided to give away or payment for the ballroom that will scar the edifice where the East Wing used to be. For most negotiating partners, such threats leave two choices: suing in an attempt to deem the entire extortion attempt unlawful, or attempting to minimize the extracted tribute through flattery.

But for China and the Democrats it is different. The government of China doesn’t *do* flattery – not of foreigners, anyway. Plus, China has been preparing for this moment since the *last* time Trump tried it, in his first term, in part by increasing its own capacity, in part by replacing American suppliers with countries China has been wooing with soft power for years.

And while Democrats have been suing and suing and suing, Trump’s ultimate goal for the minority – whose party currently leads most of the net donor states in the US – is nothing less than subjugation. Trump was happier to negotiate with Hamas than negotiate with Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries. Trump intends to make them, all Democrats, give him the adulation they refuse him.

And so Trump’s negotiating “tactics” for both are similar: a serial ratcheting up of demands, based on the belief that the desired end – subjugation – is the *means* to win the

negotiation. In both cases, this obstinance has instead created vulnerabilities. By pushing China to impose an export control regime not dissimilar to those the US uses, Trump gave China leverage over the Rest of World countries with which China will continue to trade even as Trump shrivels inside his manufactured walls, the countries Trump once wished to peel off from China.

And every time Russ Vought commits another unprecedented Antideficiency Act crime, it proves the Democrats' point that there can be no negotiations unless that lawlessness ceases.

But when Trump decided that he had to pay military servicemembers, he directly violated congressional statute. It is "by far the most illegal budgetary action he's taken as POTUS, potentially setting the stage to break everything," writes Bobby Kogan, the senior director of federal budget policy at the Center for American Progress. "The mechanism through which Trump is paying the troops is the most blatant large Antideficiency Act (ADA) violation in US history."

Trump is taking money from an account specifically earmarked for research, development, testing, and evaluation, and spending it on military pay, which is forbidden by both the Constitution and law (the Antideficiency Act carries a jail sentence of up to two years), and something administration officials publicly promised Congress they would not do. Dave Jamieson reports at HuffPost that Trump is planning a similar process to keep paying ICE and CBP law enforcement.

Even in three votes on paying essential workers, Democrats refused to budge for a bill that ceded any more power to Vought (the end vote was the same as cloture for the continuing resolution

has been, but two different Democrats – Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock – voting with Republicans instead of Catherine Cortez Masto and Angus King).

Vought becomes a greater liability as he gleefully cuts things cherished by Republicans, too, like the promise of an easier commute into NYC.

Having failed thus far, Trump is going to withhold emergency funding for SNAP starting this week. Either he believes that Democrats have empathy (or courage) that Republicans don't, or he forgets that poor people across the country rely on government aid. But he believes that starving families will force Democrats to bow.

Donald Trump is destroying not just the village but broad swaths of the country in his bid to humiliate his two adversaries. He is seeking capitulation to his person rather than any benefits for the United States.

Even as the country remains shut down, Marco Rubio and Stephen Miller have become NeoNeoCons.

Trump has reverted to Cold War means, launching a larger covert war based on dubious legal claims, what his buddies call the "Donroe Doctrine," a name as stupid as the concept.

Mr. Trump's new directive appears to envision a different approach, focused on U.S. forces directly capturing or killing people involved in the drug trade.

Labeling the cartels as terrorist groups allows the United States "to use other elements of American power, intelligence agencies, the Department of Defense, whatever, to target these groups if we have an opportunity to do it," Marco Rubio, the secretary of state and national security adviser, said on Thursday in an interview with the Catholic news outlet EWTN. "We have to

start treating them as armed terrorist organizations, not simply drug dealing organizations.”

The use of Special Forces against alleged drug cartels in other countries rests on the same kind of legal chicanery and nested fabrications that went into Stephen Miller’s unlawful deportation of mostly innocent Venezuelans to Bukele’s concentration camp. And even though the B-1 bombers flying off the coast of Venezuela were readily tracked on commercial apps, Trump explicitly denied them. They’re not hiding, though, that they’re sending the ships that have for decades projected power in the Middle East to take out a two-bit dictator in Venezuela.

But that’s not the only bullshit Trump is selling. For example, Trump’s latest cartel designation – of Cartel de los Soles – is of a cartel that (unlike TdA) may not even exist.

While some of US President Donald Trump’s right-wing led allies in South America – Argentina, Ecuador and Paraguay – have echoed his designation of “Soles” as a terrorist organization, many have doubts such a group even exists.

Venezuela itself, and neighbor Colombia, insist there is no such thing as “Cartel de los Soles.”

Some experts agree, saying there is no evidence of the existence of an organized group with a defined hierarchy that goes by that name.

[snip]

“There is no such thing, so Maduro can hardly be its boss,” Phil Gunson, an analyst at the International Crisis Group think tank, told AFP of the so-called “Cartel de los Soles.”

[snip]

According to the InSight Crime think tank, the name was ironically coined by Venezuelan media in 1993 after two generals were nabbed for drug trafficking. The sun is a symbol on the military uniform epaulettes of generals in the South American country.

“Rather than a hierarchical organization with Maduro directing drug trafficking strategies, the Cartel of the Suns is more accurately described as a system of corruption wherein military and political officials profit by working with drug traffickers,” InSight Crime said on its website.

Yet that is the sketchy basis on which Stephen Miller has authorized the murder of one after another boat full of unidentified, first in the Caribbean and now in the Pacific.

The Administration’s thinking – starting from Stephen Miller’s goal of using dead Latinos as a propaganda stunt– is insanely childish.

Then there are the senior officials who see Venezuela as a means to project a tough-guy, defender-of-the-homeland image. Stephen Miller views the air strikes as an opportunity to paint immigrants as a dangerous menace, according to one of the White House officials. Vice President J. D. Vance, though often inclined toward isolationism, has pushed the necessity of defending U.S. borders. And Hegseth, who prefers to be known as the war secretary, is seeking a means of projecting military strength in a region where Defense Department planners hope to reassert American primacy. Finally, there’s Trump himself, who wants to score a foreign-policy victory amid frustrations over his inability to end the war in Ukraine. One close ally of the president’s told us that he was also

drawn to the chance to take decisive action, as he did with June's Iran bombings. "He can give the order and watch it explode. It's clear-cut and simple, and no American gets hurt," that ally told us.

This is not the Dulles brothers playing chess. It's a bunch of insecure boys overturning the checkers board because the rules assign the same number of pieces to both sides. But they're toppling the board while wielding very big weapons and sketchy – or no – targeting data.

Indeed, they *look* like they're playing, from the failure to destroy a submersible in open water, leaving two very inconvenient survivors, to the shrapnel strike on the Vice President's security, to the new propaganda corps made up of Russian useful idiots.

Such buffoonery extends to Miller's war on Blue cities. For all the untold human damage it has and is causing, it nevertheless continues to shine in its Butt Cracks and Beer Belly squalor, including in its training dropouts who can't pass an open book test on the Fourth Amendment.

Like the invasion of Latin America, it feigns root in intelligence, as viewed by the invasion of an entire apartment building on Chicago's South Shore Drive predicated on the alleged presence of one or at most two Tren de Aragua members, looking just like an apartment invasion John Yoo dreamt up 24 years ago.

[I]n execution, a number of aspects of the raid looks just like what the raid Yoo envisioned two decades ago.

The raid took place in the middle of the night; a warranted search would mandate permissible hours – usually after dawn – when the search could be conducted.

The entire raid was predicated on the presence of (initially) two and in retrospect just a single Tren de Aragua

member. But virtually every one was detained while law enforcement searched for active warrants, and 37 people were arrested. With the exception of a few apartments, the entire building was searched, and left in a mess.

[snip]

In other words, this raid looks just like what we would expect if Stephen Miller were applying already-dodgy John Yoo opinions targeting terrorists who really did launch a military style attack on the US, and applied it, instead, against a gang that Miller has lied persistently to turn into something greater than it is.

But mostly, like the make-believe cartel just added to the terrorist list, the predicate for invading Blue cities remains make-believe.

Stephen Miller's justifications for invading Blue cities is no more based in reality than the latest cartel he invaded on which to hang murderboats and Special Operations invasions.

Miller has fed Trump manufactured propaganda about Oregon. And those on the ground have manufactured false claims. Or, in Oregon, the state informed the Ninth Circuit that a key claim a panel used to overturn Trump appointee Karin Immergut's injunction on Guard deployment – that much of the Federal Protective Services had had to deploy to Portland, was false: "defendants admitted that 115 FPS officers have *never* been redeployed to Portland."

Or in Chicago, the explanation that Greg Bovino contemptuously violated a retraining more with claims of "commercial artillery shell fireworks." "The statement is a lie," lawyers for Illinois stated plainly about the claimed use of commercial artillery shell fireworks.

It's still very much in question whether appellate courts and SCOTUS will permit Trump to

invade Blue cities based entirely on propaganda, as Susan Graber asked in her dissent to her colleagues' decision to allow Trump to invade Oregon (a dissent that noted the vagueness of the now-debunked FPS claim).

We have come to expect a dose of political theater in the political branches, drama designed to rally the base or to rile or intimidate political opponents. We also may expect there a measure of bending—sometimes breaking—the truth. By design of the Founders, the judicial branch stands apart. We rule on facts, not on supposition or conjecture, and certainly not on fabrication or propaganda. I urge my colleagues on this court to act swiftly to vacate the majority's order before the illegal deployment of troops under false pretenses can occur. Above all, I ask those who are watching this case unfold to retain faith in our judicial system for just a little longer.

Steve Vladeck lays out the play of all three Blue states – California, Oregon, and Illinois – challenging Trump's invasion. Joyce Vance has a great update on the Ninth. And Chris Geidner catalogs all the innocent Americans whose rights are being trampled along the way, with three attempts to get Justice Kavanaugh to answer for the Kavanaugh stops he blessed.

Trump is engaging in a kind of magical realism in both Latin America and the United States, inventing the most transparent, outlandish bullshit to justify military invasions by incompetent dolts of both other countries and Blue states.

And for all his dickwagging about power, both of those campaigns make the United States far weaker.

But all that's happening against the background

of Trump's intransigence – his demand that, while he conducts these invasions, both China and the Democrats (and more recently, Canada) simply bow before him.

This is one reason I'm especially fascinated by Trump's treatment of Argentina, an attempt to support their peso long enough to stave off a debacle for Javier Milei in this weekend's legislative elections. That part succeeded: Milei's party won more than enough seats to sustain his veto power.

President Javier Milei scored a decisive political win Sunday, strengthening his position in Argentina's Congress and securing a lifeline for his audacious free-market revolution backed by President Trump.

With nearly 92% of votes counted, Milei's Freedom Advances party won almost 41% of the national vote, putting it on track to more than double its representation in Congress. That means his party and allies should secure at least one-third of the seats in both chambers—the critical threshold that allows Milei to preserve his veto power and defend his sweeping decrees.

The result, stronger than most polls had predicted, gives Milei fresh political momentum after months of unrest over deep spending cuts and a grinding recession last year. It also shores up his standing with Washington and the International Monetary Fund, which have tied future financial support to the survival of his austerity experiment. Market analysts expect Argentine bonds and the peso to rally when trading opens Monday, reflecting relief that Milei still has political traction.

But at what expense?

The only conceivable way to spin this bailout as a benefit for the US – other than for Scott Bessent’s hedge fund buddies and a right wing populist, like Trump, tainted by corruption problems – is to imagine that this bailout, the cost of which soon may rise to \$40 billion, helps shore up US allies on a continent increasingly cultivated by China.

That is, in the same year Trump willfully destroyed USAID (yearly budget, \$30 billion for the entire world), the best explanation for spending up to \$40 billion bailing out a failed economic ideology is that same purpose: soft power.

For just one country.



Steven Cheung @StevenCheung47 · 11h

The beginning of something beautiful.



In a nice touch, the folks in Treasury who’ve implemented Bessent’s bailout of his hedge buddies have been instructed not to take and disseminate pictures of the wreck Trump has made of the East Wing.

“As construction proceeds on the White House grounds, employees should refrain from taking and sharing photographs of the grounds, to include the East Wing, without prior approval from the Office of Public Affairs,” a Treasury official wrote on Monday evening in an email to department employees viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

A Treasury Department spokesman said the email was sent to employees because photos could “potentially reveal sensitive items, including security

features or confidential structural details.”

But the tone deaf bailout wasn’t enough. Nor was Argentina’s poaching of US soybean markets in China, the final death blow for the US soybean market this year. But in the last week, Trump has signaled he will turn to Argentine beef imports in an attempt to bring sky-high beef prices down.

In an interview with Fox Business on Thursday, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said: “Currently, Americans consume 12 million metric tons of beef. 10 million, we produce in this country. 2 million, we import. Out of 12 million, [the Argentine quota] would be 20,000 every quarter. This is not a massive influx in the millions of tons I think that some have thought of beef from Argentina.”

But Christian Lovell, an Illinois cattle farmer and the senior director of programs at Farm Action, a nonpartisan farm organization, said: “If Trump goes through with what he outlined, I do believe it’s a betrayal of the American rancher. It’s a feeling that you’re selling us out to a foreign competitor.”

On Wednesday, Trump reacted to the backlash from cattle ranchers.

“The Cattle Ranchers, who I love, don’t understand that the only reason they are doing so well, for the first time in decades, is because I put Tariffs on cattle coming into the United States, including a 50% Tariff on Brazil,” Trump wrote on social media.

“It would be nice if they would understand that, but they also have to get their prices down, because the consumer is a very big factor in my thinking, also!” he added.

In a statement, Colin Woodall, CEO of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a trade association for beef producers, said the organization and its members "cannot stand behind the President while he undercuts the future of family farmers and ranchers by importing Argentinian beef in an attempt to influence prices."

Trump got what he wanted in Argentina, propping up his chainsaw puppet for the next little while.

But in doing so, he made the US far weaker, making China's leverage over the US even greater.

Trump's attempts to extend his power by force – to replace American hegemony with personalized coercion – are and will continue to backfire, diluting the power of that coercion.

No one knows what happens after that.